

## ***Silent Voices*, by Adong Judith**

### **Education Pack**

**THEMES:**

POLITICAL & RELIGIOUS FANATICISM

GENDER AND RACE

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

**GENRE:** Political Theatre / Documentary Drama

**AGE RESTRICTION:** 16+ (strong language, weapons and scenes of explicit violence)

**NUMBER OF CHARACTERS:** 30 + Performers (12F, 15M)

**NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:** The original production was staged with 30 performers as shown below because it was important for the playwright/producer to capture the communal essence of the Acholi people. However, recognizing financial challenges usually involved in productions, especially in a capitalistic world, producers and/or directors can choose to use the number of cast as per their discretion as long as it does not interfere with the meaning of the play as intended.

**CHARACTER LIST:**

Adult cast

**MOTHER**, a former slave wife to a rebel commander now in her fifties. She is the mother of Omony.

**GUARD 1 / MAN**, Mother's security guard in prison, who in Mother's unstable mental state becomes Man, the rebel leader.

**GUARD 2 / BOSS**, Mother's security guard in prison, who in Mother's unstable mental state becomes Boss, the President.

**CID / MEDIATOR / LC5 / JUDGE**, a pompous crime investigator, who in Mother's unstable mental state becomes the peace talks Mediator, Local Council 5 and Judge.

**JUMA / JOURNALIST / MP / COURT CLERK**, a police officer who works closely with the CID , who in Mother's unstable mental state becomes a News Anchor, Journalist, Member of Parliament and Court Clerk.

**HUSBAND**, a young man in his early thirties, son of a former rebel leader.

**WIFE / PROSECUTOR**, a young woman in her thirties, married to Husband who in Mother's unstable mental state becomes the Prosecutor.

**MARGARET**, the granddaughter of former rebel leader and niece to Husband, who currently works as a former child soldiers' rehabilitation officer.

**OMONY**, a young, likable man, Mother's son and boyfriend to Margaret.

**BISHOP / MOTHER's LAWYER**, a Catholic Bishop, who in Mother's unstable mental state becomes her Lawyer.

*Child cast*

**BOY 1 / BOY 4**, a 12-year-old former child soldier who is also Commander Man and Kadogo NoJoke.

**BOY 2 / CDR. SHOOTER / KADOGO NOJOKE**, an 11-year-old former child soldier who is also Odokonyero Richard, Mother's brother, Kadogo Smiles and Commander Shooter.

**BOY 3**, a 10-year-old former child soldier who is also Commander Danger Hatari.

**KADOGO ACTION / CDR. AK47 / KADOGO SMILES**, an 8-year-old former child soldier who is also Kadogo Action and Commander AK 47.

**BOY 5 / KADOGO NINJA / CDR. LONG RANGE**, a 9-year-old former child soldier who is also Kadogo Ninja, Commander Long Range and Mother's brother.

**GIRL 1 / CDR. AK47'S BRIDE / CDR. DANGER HATARI'S WIFE**, a 6-year-old former slave wife who is also Aber Flavia, Mother's sister and Commander Danger Hatari's wife.

**GIRL 2**, an 8-year-old former slave wife whose name is Alal and is also young Mother/Commander Danger Hatari's bride.

**GIRL 3 / CDR SHOOTER'S BRIDE / ATUKU / SCOVIA**, an 11-year-old former slave wife whose name is Abur, is also Commander Shooter's bride and Atuku, Commander Danger Hatari's senior wife.

**GIRL 4 / CDR LONG RANGE'S BRIDE / BRENDA / CDR DANGER HATARI'S WIFE**, a 10-year-old former slave wife who is also the bride to Commander Long Range, wife to Commander Danger Hatari and Brenda.

**GIRL 5 / FIONA / CDR MAN'S BRIDE**, a 6-year-old former slave wife who is also Fiona and Commander Man's bride.

Dancers

**DANCER / BOSS' DELEGATE / WOMAN / CROWD**, dancer who is also Boss' delegate in the peace talks, court witness woman and crowd member.

**DANCER / AMAL / CROWD**, dancer who is also Amal, Mother's mother and crowd member.

**DANCER / BRIDE / CROWD**, dancer who is also the bride of the marriage ceremony at Mother's homestead and crowd member.

**DANCER / WAITRESS / SOLDIER 1 & 3 / CROWD**, dancer who is Waitress at the peace talks hotel, government soldier 1 and 3 and crowd member.

**DANCER / GROOM / MAN'S DELEGATE / CROWD**, dancer who is also the groom of the marriage ceremony at Mother's homestead, Man's peace talks delegate and crowd member.

**DANCER / MEDIATOR'S ASST. / MAN 2 / CROWD**, dancer who is also Mediator's assistant at the peace talks hotel, court witness as Man 2 and crowd member.

**DANCER / WAITER / SOLDIER 5 / CROWD**, dancer who is also Waiter at the peace talks hotel, government soldier 5 and crowd member.

**DANCER / SOLDIER 2 / MAN 1 / CROWD**, dancer who is also government soldier 2, court witness Man 1 and crowd member.

**DANCER / WAITER / SOLDIER 4 / CROWD**, dancer who is also Waiter at the peace talks hotel, government soldier 4 and crowd member.

**DANCER / LATIGO / CROWD**, dancer who is also Latigo, Mother's father and crowd member.

#### **SYNOPSIS:**

Set in a town after the Northern Ugandan War, a mother, who has been jailed for her part in the death of several children, remembers what happened to her community. Imagination interrupts the memories as she contends with the experience for the children of the town. The play rapidly switches location from prison to bush to rehabilitation centre to court room. Small scenarios are split into micro-scenes that can be reordered and repeated for emphasis. The fast-paced cross-cutting between Mother's memory and imagination reflects her frenzied desire to perform her ancestral ritual in the presence of the judge and lawyer.

*Silent Voices* explores how victims have been ignored by the constant calls for forgiveness and reconciliation by Amnesty International, transitional justice projects, governments, NGOs and political leaders. Through the protagonist, Mother, who is a symbolic representation of life and death, *Silent Voices* examines what ordinary citizens can be driven to do by unhealthy policies.

Partly developed at the Sundance Institute Theatre Program – East Africa Lab in 2010, from stories Adong had collected from her hometown of Gulu in 2006, *Silent Voices* has had three productions in Uganda and readings in Kenya and New York City. Directed by New York-based British director, Dennis Hilton-Reid, the play received an acclaimed world premiere in 2012 at the National Theatre of Uganda

amidst fear of Adong's arrest for her portrayal of the government's role in Northern Uganda war crimes.

Originally written in English, the play was described in her country as 'the spiritual rebirth of theatre in Uganda since the decline of critical theatre due to political persecution of artists during the Idi Amin Regime'. It brought victims and political, religious, cultural leaders – also Amnesty and Transitional Justice leaders – together for critical, transformative conversations. To access local communities, Adong returned to three towns in Northern Uganda – Gulu, Kitgum and Lira – in 2015 with an Acholi language production, which she directed and ran back-to-back in Kampala at the National Theatre of Uganda with the English production of the play.

### **KEY MOMENTS:**

#### **pp. 149-151 (1F, 1M)**

Dialogue: Ancestral Homestead - Mother and Omony discuss his relationship with Margaret

#### **pp. 203-209 (2F, 5M)**

Monologue: Courtroom – Mother in frenzy full of guilt and mourning, begs the "Lawyer" and the "Judge" to perform her ancestral ritual.

#### **pp. 137-142 (3F, 5M)**

Climax: Not necessarily the active climax of the play, but one of the most impactful scenes happens early in the text, between the children in the Jungle and the boy Commander tells the other boy to send his sister "back home".

### **STEP ONE: ASK**

What questions come to the students' minds when they read these scenes/excerpts? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the play

which have no easy answers. Think about the universal themes raised above and try to combine more than one concept in each question. Here is an example:

- What is the role of children in society? Who should educate them? Is it the role of their families to protect or, as the saying goes, “it takes a village”?
- What is the role of religion in children’s upbringing? How can we assure children are not made vulnerable or violent due to religious dogmas?
- Can we think of any recent case scenarios in our society where children’s lives were threatened by religious and/or political disputes?

Consider these questions across political and religious fanaticism – especially among children, gender and race intersectional issues/toxic gender roles, religious identity issues within post-colonial societies, and explore if students can relate to the issues portrayed in this text.

## **STEP TWO: EXPLORE**

### **Exercise 1:**

Director vs cast. Split them into two groups, giving them a short scene to study (preferably an action scene, when an outside character appears, as scene one, six, or seven) and prepare a short ad libbed performance. They should choose one director per team and directors are to be taken away from the group and given their roles – one will be the “good” director and go along with anything their cast proposes, avoid imposing their ideas, allowing all actors to have a voice; the other will be the “evil” director, who will guide every minutia of the performance, not tolerating questioning or suggestions. The trick is that the casts will also have been given instructions: the “good” director’s cast should simply agree with whatever the director says, and do something completely different when performing; the “evil” director’s cast should always ask why for any directorial choice, challenging anything the director says. Once they showcase their performances bring them to a circle and allow them to debate their roles and their experiences with hierarchical roles – is there a positive approach to hierarchy? How could you avoid toxic hierarchy?

### **Exercise 2:**

The play makes a point that the sense of community needs to be imprinted throughout the whole play, hence the great number of performers. In order to study both character work and this sense of community there is a simple but effective exercise:

Preferably after everyone is assigned a character (but if not, give them five minutes to find a small paragraph in the text that catches their attention), ask students to stand in a block – as close as possible to each other – and repeat that paragraph with different subtexts or imagining different set circumstances. They must repeat the same paragraph over and over they chose individually, all together as a group (this will create a dissonant sound, but being a voice among the crowd can be very liberating). At points, call out their individual names, one by one. Once they hear a name being called, the group remains in silence, and the person whose name was called must repeat their paragraph out loud once. After the person finishes their paragraph, the group restarts the repetition all at once. This can be repeated as many times as needed, or until everyone in the class has had a go.

### **Exercise 3:**

As ritual and the oppression of women in society is one of the strongest themes of the play, this exercise by Augusto Boal can be incredibly helpful -

Split students in groups of six, three men and three women. Ask them to construct a model of a flat which could be used by the six. Living room, kitchen, television, bedroom, beds, furniture, WC, etc., to be set out however they liked, to reproduce a typical flat.

Then get them all to go out, except for the women. Then ask them individually to show you quickly all the movements and gestures she would do ritually from the moment she came home from her work to the moment she went to bed. These gestures and movements had to be done in a demonstrative and non-realistic fashion: that is, they should show, for instance, that she ate, and then go on to the next action without going into the details. The whole thing, from her arrival home to her bedtime, had to last three or four minutes; if the time is cut down further than that, the material is not sufficiently revealing.

Now repeat the same with the men. Ask the women to observe this. Then ask the six participants to return to 'the flat', and to do the movements they had previously done, but this time all together. They simply had to accelerate the movement, do everything at high speed, as if they were in one of those silent films where everyone seems to be running. Who has finished first? Who seemed to be "working" more? Are those rituals ours or passed onto us by others?

Ritual is one of the forms (among others) which create the theatrical conditions to ensure that Forum Theatre is theatre first and foremost, and not solely forum.

Very often the ritual contains elements which are actual causes of the oppression being treated, and, frequently, liberation from the oppression of necessity involves the rupture of its rituals.

### **STEP THREE: FEEDBACK**

Discuss what came up for the students. Can they relate with the characters' plight? What was the most interesting thing they learned? Bring students to return to the text and analyse what they are taking away from the exercises for their character study - if they have been assigned their characters already. Once the text is read in its entirety, perhaps pose the further questions:

- How different does one experience the world because of their religion or their ethnicity? How does that reflect in today's society?
- How is the hierarchy of power between the characters shown? Are those hierarchical relationships fixed or do they change over time?
- Does the pursuit of freedom and/or justice justify a crime, murder for example? How can this be analysed in Mother's case?